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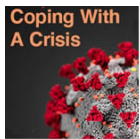
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## CHORAL MUSIC REVIEW

# Women's Voices Chorus Gives Fine Performance of Newly Commissioned Work

By [Maggie Pate](#)

May 23, 2021 - Chapel Hill, NC:



On Sunday evening, [Women's Voices Chorus of Chapel Hill](#), under the direction of artistic director [Laura Sam](#), performed their final concert of the season, entitled "Nature of the Heart." Combining the themes of remembering and renewal "as the earth's beauty illustrates [in] the cyclical nature of life," this virtual concert demonstrated thoughtful and effective programming.

As the virtual audience waited online for the performance to begin, I was struck by the amazing ability shown in the arts community to adapt this past year, especially in the technical realm. Taking the place of performance butterflies and the excitement of a live audience comes the anxiety about whether the virtual curtain will rise. But it did – and right on time.

Initial opening comments were made by the current president, Kay Johnson, and by Maestra Sam. It was noted that things had been gained through the pandemic such as growing musicianship and deepening of friendships as well as having the opportunity to be visited by composers.

Program notes available online noted the chorus to include 19 first sopranos, 18 second sopranos, 21 first altos, and 20 second altos – impressive in numbers as well as their clear blend and lovely tonality.

As with WVC's [previous concert this year](#), tasteful video design and thoughtful graphics enhanced the viewers' experience throughout. The singers appeared superimposed in individual boxes, all recorded on their own, with pianist [Debra Hollis](#) in the lower left corner when accompanying. Sam not only wore the hat of artistic director but was also credited for the effective video design and editing for this fine production.

WVC's unique promotion of choral works specifically written *by* women *for* women did not disappoint this evening. Notably, with the exception of two texts written by [Emily Dickenson](#) and [Hildegard von Bingen](#), the programming included all living female composers and poets of the highest caliber.

Appropriately, WVC began with [Jocelyn Hagen's](#) (b.1980) setting of "I Started Out Singing" with text by Arab American poet [Naomi Shihab Nye](#) (b.1952). Singers Betty Schumacher and Kimberly Slentz-Kesler introduced the composer and text respectively.

"My River Runs to Thee" was composed by Jayne Borrás (b.1986) who has roots in North Carolina with an undergraduate degree from Duke, going on to obtain a masters at Boston University. With text by Dickenson, the choir immediately drew out the gorgeous compositional voicings. Unexpected chordal changes were refreshing in this short but beautiful a cappella work sung with clear, natural presence by the choir. Sue Gidwitz and Hannah Andrews provided current context in their introduction of the piece.

"O ignee Spiritus," introduced by members Katie Shrieves and Diane Wold, was written by Italian composer [Carlotta Ferrari](#) (b.1975) with text by Hildegard. The recording began with images of Hildegard's manuscripts and of her convent with the singers' faces being gradually superimposed along with some of Hildegard's ecstatic art. Lovely! Singing as one collective, the choir produced an appropriately nice straight-tone with good intonation. Ferrari seems to have composed this in a more accessible way for modern sensibilities than the more enraptured delivery one thinks of with all things Hildegard. Nevertheless, a pure and beautiful tone from the choir provided a deeply sensitive and moving performance.

Next, we heard "Some Glad Morning" by [Carolyn Jennings](#) (b.1936) with text by [Joyce Sutphen](#) (b.1949). Marsha Ferguson and Brenda Edwards provided the introductions. I must say that really enjoyed Edwards' reading of the text which was just delightful and full of expression. Accompanied again by Hollis,

## EVENT INFORMATION

( Sun., May. 23, 2021 )

[Women's Voices Chorus: Spring Concert: Nature of the Heart](#)

Performed by Laura Sam, Artistic Director; Deborah Hollis, Pianist  
Free, donations welcome -- Online ,  
<https://womensvoiceschorus.org/03/of-the-heart-sunday-may-23-700-p-m/> -- 7:00 PM

WVC smoothly traversed this expressive setting full of modulation and key changes that mirrored the mood of the text so well. This is a wonderful setting – simple and simply beautiful.

An important part of the work of WVC is to commission new works by women composers. "What the Heart Cannot Forget," by 23 year old phenom [Grace Brigham](#) (b.1998), was commissioned in honor of WVC founding member Elisabeth Curtis.

As noted in the introduction, Brigham shared her inspiration for the piece as follows: "As soon as Laura presented me with Joyce Sutphen's poem, "[What the Heart Cannot Forget](#)," I found it strikingly beautiful and inspirational. The first emotion that came to mind was nostalgia. This past year, we've all experienced isolation, and have been deprived of so many things that our hearts love. I, for one, had to miss my graduation, senior recital, and seeing friends and family. What I know we all miss is having the opportunity to be singing together right now. My inspiration for this piece came from reminiscing on what life felt like before the pandemic, and the hope I have that we can soon return to normalcy."

WVC member and daughter of Elisabeth, Meg Berreth told us that this was her mother's favorite poem, while Elisabeth herself read the text to our virtual audience with her own deep understanding. It was such a joy to witness the group's sharing in this way and made Elisabeth's contribution (to the choir and through the reading) all the more important.

The piece builds from the "ground up" with the lower altos beginning with what "rock remembers" followed by what "cloud" remembers. Janet Heubner was soloist for the verse regarding what "turtle" remembers. She was then joined by Kate Berreth in a short but beautiful duet. The work then builds upon the natural theme of what tree, skin and bone, and finally of the heart's remembering. Extremely moving in the final verse was the replacement of the singers' faces with images of people that their hearts cannot forget. Brilliant!

Pianist Hollis, cellist Debbie Davis along with the composer Brigham playing violin, supported the choir throughout. The singing was uniformly fine with excellent intonation, diction and especially warmth of character and understanding.

All narrators were at ease and offered helpful background on both the composers and the poets. The programming was just the right length for an online event. If there was one wish, it would be for this to be heard live so that the music could fully resonate. All in good time, I am sure!

Brava to all of the women in this program. Thank you for your tenacity this past year and for your beautiful contribution to the world of choral music.

Check out this performance on the [Women's Voices Chorus YouTube](#) channel.



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